



# Reflections on the Support for Refugee Families at North Belconnen Uniting Church



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Refugee support was undertaken at our church consistent with Jesus' response to the question: "Who is my neighbour?" in the parable of the Good Samaritan. There was considerable sadness and anger in our community when government policy of hostility to asylum seekers and refugees caused us to cease direct interaction with refugees. Humanitarian concern for the plight of desperate people fleeing for their lives was replaced when politicians sought advantage by making out that these people arriving by boat are not like us and are unworthy of our help, declaring that they were illegal despite Australia being a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention which Australia strongly helped to establish. This is incongruous when so many people have come here over the history of Australia, leaving a very difficult life in their home country to make a new life here.

We will be delighted if publishing this report can help bring about a more compassionate and accepting society in Australia.

This report has been written by Graham Freeman with significant input from Malcolm Morrison, Billy Williams, Margaret Kilham, Linnea Leece, Rocky Padjen, and Audrey Parsons.

Pictures on the cover are:  
in 1992 – one of the Spring Roll drives organized by Margaret Kilham and Haysin Hac, and in 1996 – the Quintanilla family and church supporters.

## **Reflections on the Support for Refugee Families at North Belconnen Uniting Church**

When Malcolm Morrison was aware that he did not have long to live, he spent time dictating to Billy Williams an account of his involvement with refugees at the North Belconnen Uniting Church. This involvement followed his retirement and his attending an Emmaus Walk in April 1990 where he was challenged on what he intended to do about his faith in Jesus. This reflection quotes much of what he said to Billy, but is expanded to cover the whole of the period when the church in Melba was heavily involved in supporting refugees. Malcolm's words are in italics throughout the document. There were more people committed to this effort than can be accurately listed, so while this account seeks to recognize the breadth of this involvement, I apologise to the volunteers whose name is omitted.

Refugee support became important after the end of the war in Vietnam in 1975 as many people from South Vietnam fled the unified country in fear. In 1979, the North Belconnen Cooperating Churches Refugee Committee was formed. This cumbersome name reflected the state of the church that was meeting at the Melba Primary School: the North Belconnen Uniting Church and the St Pauls Anglican Church. They were in close cooperation, meeting in the library and assembly hall concurrently and sometimes meeting together, and having a common purse. This cooperation officially came to an end at the direction of the Anglican bishop around 1982. The Uniting Church minister, Geoff Bridge, strongly encouraged refugee support, consistent with the importance he gave to social responsibility, and Anglican members were also active.

The support for refugees took two forms: firstly direct financial, physical and emotional support for refugee families migrating to Australia and living in Belconnen, and secondly political advocacy for refugees.

### ***The earliest families***

The first family that the church assisted came from Vietnam in 1980. Margaret Kilham describes the experience this way:

*"We were asked to take on a family coordinated through the Indo China Refugee Association. Marion Le, a school teacher and subsequently a professional migration activist and agent, was very active in the association. Our first Minister, Geoff Bridge, a very outward looking and inclusive person, was in his last year with us before returning to South Australia. He had previously been the Minister in the South Woden Congregation. They also took on Refugee Support.*

*"The first family comprised a couple, their daughter in her twenties and her boyfriend. The Bridge family had moved out of the UC Manse in Chinner Crescent into a home they had purchased in MacGrath Crescent. The refugee family was accommodated at Chinner Crescent. Other than housing, our principle support involved organising a marriage for the young couple after she became pregnant. Geoff married them at Wattle Park and we organised a reception. The Brownhall family, Berthon family, Waugh family and Kilham*



family and Sandy and Audrey Laing were all very involved. Margaret had Emily a couple of weeks later which dates the event as June 1980. Leah Brownhall was the main organiser. All the above participants apart from the Kilhams have long since moved interstate. The family moved out of our area fairly soon. Chinner Crescent then took on the role of Community Centre acting as venue for Op Shop, small group meeting, social functions etc.”



One incident with this family illustrates how the committee needed time to learn about the difference in culture. The committee decorated the tables for the wedding breakfast with white table cloths and white flowers. This was met with horror by the family – white is the colour for mourning in Vietnam. Red flowers had to be quickly organized before the main wedding party arrived.

### ***Naysin Hac's family, the Diep families, and others from Cambodia***

Margaret describes taking on our second family this way: “Dieter Tieman became our Minister in 1981. He and Alison had a particular interest in social justice and were very encouraging when we were approached by the South Woden congregation to take over support of the Cambodian Hac/Diep families who had been relocated from Woden into Baringa Gardens (community housing in Melba). A remnant of this failed social housing venture is our Neighbourhood Centre which we bought from the ACT Government when the flats were demolished.”

Naysin Hac and her family had fled from Cambodia in the face of Pol Pot's atrocities and in fear of the Vietnamese troops who had entered the country to stop the carnage but were regarded as traditional enemies in Cambodia. Naysin's sister had left Cambodia some years earlier, trained as a Doctor and lived and worked in Woden. She went with the Red Cross to the camp in Thailand to provide aid. She was riding on the







back of a truck one day in the crowded camp and happened to see her sister Naysin. Due to her representation Naysin and family were accepted by the Australian Government in their quota.

Naysin had two teenaged daughters, Seyha and Seray, a married daughter Pheap with her husband Leng Diep, their three sons, and also one of Leng's brothers, Lut, who had changed his surname to Hac to simplify immigration processing. Naysin had converted to Christianity in the camp and the family became strongly integrated into the congregation. Naysin had been a teacher back in Cambodia and she ran cooking classes for the church. For many years she cooked springrolls for the church to sell to raise money, with church members sometimes organized to assist in making the rolls, Margaret Kilham organizing ordering and distribution and Roger the accounting. Naysin continued making springrolls for sale at the annual church fete until after 2000. In 1984, the church ran a cultural evening in the Wattle Park hall, with Cambodian dancing and Cambodian food and supported by the whole Cambodian community in Canberra.

Naysin helped in the Miles Franklin School library in an endeavour to accrue points in sponsoring one of her family members still in Cambodia. Her daughter Seyha worked for many years in the US Embassy. Naysin married Reg Dyett in 1999, the wedding attended by many church supporters. Margaret Kilham has said: "Reg, a staunch Catholic, was unable to marry her in the RC church because she had no documentation that she was a widow. Margaret and Roger approached Andy Carlisle who was happy to marry them in the Uniting

Church.” There were five generations of Naysin’s family present at the wedding, with her mother still alive and her first great-grandchild. The primary carers for Naysin and her family were Jocelyn and David Waugh, and Margaret and Roger Kilham.

We then sponsored two more Cambodian families, Vuth and Kim Leng Sin, with their children Lim, Pheakedy and Dany, and Chhoeun and Teng Un, with children Caon and Chhourn. Chhoeun had been the captain of a river boat in Cambodia.

The next Cambodian group to arrive from the Thai camp in 1988 were Leng’s sister Muoy Diep with her husband and children, his brother Ahn with wife Sokheng and children Sokvanna and Vannak, and Leng’s parents.

The remainder of Leng’s siblings came in two groups in 1989: Leng’s brother Chun with wife Sran and children Vanary and Vanara, and Leng’s aunt Kim Hong Diep with son Sothany Heng; and Leng’s sister Pheng Liv with husband Peng Eng and children Kim Long, Kim Leang and Michelle. Kim Hong’s daughter Heng Sothavy had died in the Thai Khao-i-Dang camp when hiding during a raid by Thai soldiers. The family did not yet have UN papers and would have been returned to Cambodia if found. It was very hot and she hid from the soldiers in a water tank where she was overcome by the heat. A year after arriving in Australia, one of Chun and Sran’s daughters accidentally drowned at Uriarra Crossing in the fast flowing water and rocky bed.

Settling the extended family was a lot simpler than taking on new families, because the established family could understand and explain things in their own language. The church was still relied upon to provide the material goods to set up home and other support. The primary carers for these families were Jocelyn and David Waugh and Margaret and Roger Kilham.







### ***Raad Butres and Eman (Iraq)***

*"It was 0930 on 30 April 1990, a plane landed in Canberra and a group from the church met Raad Butres, a refugee from Iraq, and now a very close friend. Raad had a Bachelor of Mechanical Engineering from the University of Baghdad and worked in defence factories in product design (missiles in his case). He was assigned to the Iraq army but fortunately not to the front line.*

*"After the end of the Iraq/Iran War, Raad soon left. It was illegal for engineers and doctors to leave, but he got away. He lived in Lebanon for three years, accommodated by UNHCR as a refugee before being sent to Australia. He became part of Malcolm's family as he and Raad have grown very close over the years."*

On arrival in Australia, Raad wanted to marry and to get a suitable job. Although he sponsored Eman, there were delays in her acceptance by Immigration.

Eman has been able to work as an architect since her arrival. *"She comes from an ancient Syrian Catholic Church. Raad's mother Armina and brother Khalid have also been in Australia for many years. Khalid is an IT specialist. Raad and Eman's son, Raafi, is now 20 and studying at University of Canberra. Eman is a teacher in Canberra."* Their other son Daniel is in secondary school.

*"Raad was a great help when Behnan and Wisal came to Canberra although Raad and Behnan were like chalk and cheese."*



***Jasmin and Snjezana (Zana) Copelj with Erol and Anja (Bosnia)***

*“The family arrived in Canberra in May 1994, the first of four families to arrive within eight months, a very busy time. They did not have much English. Rocky Padjen was the prime contact for this family, giving great support with his big truck involved in many moves of furniture and relocation of families.*

*“On arrival in Canberra, the Copelj’s were allocated a government unit in Holt. They had so few possessions that Malcolm could have carried all of them alone. Zana resembled a walking skeleton due to the very poor food rations available in Bosnia’s capital, Sarajevo, during the siege of the city by the Serbs. She starved herself to help keep the children alive.*

*“Jasmin was regarded as a Muslim because of his name but was non-practising, in contrast to his father, and had been employed as a senior clerk in the Bosnian Post Office, while Zana was Serbian Orthodox and had worked as a pharmacist in a hospital.*

*“Serbs hated Muslims and their cross-cultural marriage caused them to flee to Belgrade in Serbia. They stayed for six months in a rat-infested wet basement on very inadequate food rations before coming here.*

*“Jasmin never really held a secure job in Australia. He had been tortured badly in his homeland. He was also very reluctant to ever see a doctor. Zana was hard-working and was responsible for keeping the family going. They initially sold worm farms. They built a house in Canberra but had bad luck when the new house was severely damaged in a severe hail storm. They moved to Melbourne where the two children did well, completing post-graduate degrees. Rocky and Kathy Padjen have kept contact with the family.”*

Chris and Judith Dalton were also involved with the family. Linnea recalls that Zana and Yasmin was the first family that she and Al had a lot of contact with after they retired, and that she was surprised how much time refugee support took. Rocky has since reported that Errol has graduated with a PhD. Jasmin built a beautiful house in Melbourne which he has since sold and is designing and building a new one close to where Anja lives.

***Rith & Sokha Hac – Huy & Phal Hoc***

Naysin Hac’s remaining family in Cambodia were able to come to Australia under a special assistance program for Cambodians with family already in Australia. She visited Cambodia to encourage her son Rith to migrate. By chance she saw her daughter Phal in a shop, both of them recognizing each other instantly after nearly fifteen years separation without any contact.

Rith and Sokha came with a daughter, Leakhena, to live in Canberra. Linnea remembers helping with child care and taking them to the initial medical appointments. After the family moved to their own home in Charnwood, Linnea was surprised to discover Sokha sleeping on the floor when she was five months pregnant, which was quickly remedied. Phal and her

husband Huy Hok moved to Melbourne where they had a bread shop. They brought with them two children who went on to university studies.

***Ivica and Nada Tomicic with Pavao and Darko (Bosnia)***

*“Both Ivica and Nada are now deceased. On arrival in Canberra in December 1994, the family was allocated a government house which needed to be furnished. As Ivica was over 6 feet tall, he needed a queen-sized bed.*

*“Nada was very confused and was also medically ill, locking herself in a wardrobe at one point. Nada committed suicide after their house had eggs thrown at it by a malicious person in the neighbourhood.*

*“Ivica did well in Information Technology in various jobs in the APS. When he passed away in the early 2000s, the church were able (through Allan Bedford) to help with legal and other advice to deal with the estate.*

*“Lyn and Peter Davis were heavily involved in helping the family settle in to life in Canberra.”*

Linnea and Al were the primary supporters for Ivica and Nada, who came from Sarajevo in Bosnia and were a Croatian/Serbian mixed marriage.

***Armin & Suzana Hondo, Aldin and Erna (Bosnia)***

*“Suzana is Jasmin’s sister. The family arrived in January 1995 and the committee helped them for about six months before they left Canberra for Melbourne to start a new life, setting up a courier business.*

*“The family was very self sufficient. Armin had worked in Syria, Iraq and had lots of experience in ways of the world. “*

***Vilma Quintanilla – Estella and Claudia (El Salvador)***

*“Vilma, together with her daughters, Estella and Claudia, were unusual in that they came from El Salvador, Central America, arriving in February 1996. They had been hounded out of the country as she was a Sergeant of Police, appointed to this role by the previous government.*

*“Vilma arrived with no husband – apparently killed during one of the many civil wars. The family settled in quickly with the support of Malcolm, Joyce and others. The mother and daughters attended English language classes and the girls did well at school. [One of the daughters was taught by Margaret Kilham at Copland College.]*

*“After their initial temporary accommodation, the family moved into ACT government public housing in Charnwood, set up by our church – curtains and fittings and additional furniture. After about nine months Vilma thanked Malcolm, Joyce and the church for their support and*



*said they could now manage on their own. It was found out later that one of the daughters had done very well in her degree course at the ANU."*

Linnea was invited to Estela's graduation from Copland secondary college, which Linnea found a humbling experience to see Estela awarded three prizes. Estela studied Economics at ANU and then worked for ANU and KPMG.

***Abdullahi and Asli Ali-Musse, Osman Esmail and Faduma Ardow (Somali)***

*"Many Somali refugee families poured out of their country into refugee camps in Kenya. One couple, Abdullahi and Asli, arrived in Australia with Asli's half-sister, Faduma, and Osman, Abdullahi's nephew. They were members of a minority tribe forced to flee from the majority when civil war broke out. Osman, when asked what he did in the refugee camp, replied that he played soccer. Faduma had traditionally had to walk more than 5km daily to find wood for cooking.*

*"Malcolm and Joyce, and Al and Linnea Leece were the primary carers. This was the most difficult family we had to deal with. Abdullahi had worked as a translator in Kenya, and was experienced at manipulating the system to succeed in the refugee camp. They did a lot of damage to the rental house that the church organized for them, using sharp knives on the vinyl floor. The real-estate agent feared for his life when visiting the family in the house. Abdullahi was a very convincing liar, a skill he had mastered in the many years in the Kenyan camp. He reported our support group to the Department of Immigration for not providing enough bedding or clothing, despite having a wardrobe filled with blankets. He also complained to another refugee support group that we had provided no support at all, seeking supplies from them, despite the extensive amount of household goods and food we had supplied."*



The irony of the situation came when Abdullahi went to the bus station to depart for Melbourne with boxes packed with all the goods we had given them, only to be told that he had exceeded the 40 kg limit and he was forced to leave the rest behind. There were unpaid bills for electricity, gas, Telstra and rent that Osman and Faduma were left to deal with.

***Behnan & Wisal Zayya, and daughter Yasoa (Iraq)***

*“The family arrived in Canberra in 1998, with baby Yasoa. Behnan was badly injured in the war with Iran. He had been wounded in the gut, stitched up and then sent back to the front line to fight again.*

*“Behnan was unable to take any more war and decided to run away from Iraq where he met and married Wisal – described as a peasant girl – at a church in Athens while they were refugees.*

*“After settling in Canberra, they subsequently had three more children. Behnan struggled with the effects of his war wounds, with shrapnel fragments still lodged in his gut and shoulder. Providing support for the family proved difficult. He could not use an axe to chop firewood but was able to stack it. We were able to give support to him in dealing with administration staff at government authorities. ACT Housing allocated a town house which they moved into. Later they moved into a four bedroom house as the family expanded.*

*“Behnan was a very complicated person. When Wisal was five months pregnant he visited New Zealand and other countries overseas to attend conferences in the Assyrian language. He also used to read the Bible very consistently.*

*“Our last contact with Behnan and Wisal was when they were in receipt of much support from the South Sudanese refugee community in Canberra. More recently, information on them via Raad Butres indicated that they had separated, which came as no surprise. It’s likely that Behnan is still studying the Bible in ancient Hebrew while Wisal is looking after the four children. The elder child, Yasoa, would now be 20 years and is understood to be working. “*

Malcolm understands the marriage has ended and he has a second wife who was pregnant but Ben left her under the pretext of attending a conference.

***Seddiqa Seddiqi and Malalay (Afghanistan)***

*“They escaped, partly travelling by camel, from Afghanistan to Pakistan, spending 18 months in a UN refugee camp before coming to Australia in 1999. Seddiqa had run a 200-child pre-school centre in Kabul before the war when the government changed hands and forced her out in the chaos which ensued when the Taliban took over Kabul and other provinces.*

*“We then became involved in family activities including Malalay’s engagement. A few of the church supporters paid for an engagement party – in their tradition the fiancée’s family pay for this and Seddiqa had little money for pre-wedding and wedding costs. In retrospect we were involved in a financial visa racket. The soon-to-be husband was free with the truth and was mainly interested in the wedding but not with the student visa.*

*“Seddiqa was torn between her daughter and other family as the newly married couple moved to Adelaide soon after the wedding. Malcolm had caught out the bridegroom lying as he said they were going to the Gold Coast for two weeks while they actually stayed in Canberra. Seddiqa decided to move to Adelaide even though she had two cousins here. The church were able to arrange some support for her through a church contact of Chris Thornton. The last we heard they were all living in Sydney.”*



Linnea commented that Malalay wanted to do medicine. She was enrolled at Hawker College but she was well below the required standard, having never seen a calculator, let alone used a computer. Several members of the church tutored her, including Margaret Kilham and Melissa Goodwin. However, she went on holiday to Adelaide and came back engaged to a Ba’hai man. We were very sad about this. She came to see Linnea in 2018 and tried to contact Malcolm but by the time she went to Villaggio he had died. He would be delighted to know that she had left that man and the abusive marriage. She has two children. She and her mother now live, separately, in Canberra. She is a dental nurse and Sediqa works in child care.

### ***Stjepan & Milica Jokic and Zarko (Bosnia)***

*“This Croatian family from Bosnia arrived in January 2000. They had a daughter and son-in-law who had been living in Canberra since mid-1998. We found them a house in Holt.”*

***Fatmir & Ganimete Demiri and Fatmir's dad Demiri (Kosovo)***

*"They arrived in Canberra without any support as one group of about 150 persons from Kosovo. He was accompanied by his pregnant wife Ganimete. The Refugee Committee was asked by the Red Cross if it could help her settle into life here. They had been allocated housing in Belconnen where they took up residence.*

*"He had been heavily traumatised from the war in the former Yugoslavia as he had run away from the Serbian army and also resisted attempts to force him to join an Albanian/ Kosovar resistance group.*

*"At that time in 2000, the then Immigration Minister, Philip Ruddock, had decided that it was safe for all Kosovar refugees to return home and he ordered this should be done. Malcolm and others strongly resisted these attempts and participated in a vigil at the City Uniting Church, as well as lobbying MPs directly about this inhumane decision. Ruddock had lied to the Parliament when he stated that it was safe for all Kosovars to return home. Ruddock had left out a section of a UNHCR report which stated that it was NOT safe for all refugees to return. His reckless statement led to increased trauma in the Kosovar refugee group resulting in a request for help from Companion House to deal with the increased mental anguish of the group.*

*"The Government had also attempted to 'bribe' the refugees to return to Kosovo; however, the attempts had mixed success. The couple had a son born during this period which provided the family with an extension to stay in Australia till the end of June 2000.*

*"Fatmir's father was also settled in Australia under the refugee program. He had been a sheep farmer in Macedonia with a flock guarded by five large dogs. During the war, his wife and the dogs were shot by Serbian soldiers, but they left the sheep.*

*"The family were permitted to stay in Australia following a number of incremental decisions, but Fatmir suffered from serious PTSD and was seriously affected in his day-to-day activities. The couple had two more children in Canberra before leaving to move to Adelaide. It had been nine years since the family had made any contact until a recent call from Fatmir. They now run a food take-away business. One child will start university in 2018 while the second is doing well at school, favouring science."*

***Gyzele and Quenan Osmani, with children Albona, Albulena, Argon, Albinota and Albion***

***Ramadan and Ezemine Nevzadi, with children Egzon and Edon***

***Resat and Zaide Iseni, with children Bjpdina, Haxhije and Shkurte***

These three Kosovar families were referred to our church by the Demiri family as needing help. We did not receive any formal government support or recognition for this. Gordon and Audrey Parsons were the primary carers, with Robyn Wood, Lyn and Peter Davis, Janet and Ilya Hadzi-Popovic, and Jean McCulloch and Olwyn also heavily involved.



### ***Nigisti Kebede (Ethiopia)***

*“Nigisti was referred to us in 2004 by Companion House. She had arrived in Australia in 2002 with her daughters Beruh and Alem aged 8 and 6, and were initially sent to Tasmania by the Department of Immigration. There were very few Aramic speakers and almost none spoke Nigisti’s dialect. She had a mental breakdown and the children were taken into foster care although she attempted to get them back. When she came to Canberra, Nigisti was allocated public housing in the ACT. The government then asked if Companion House could help.*

*“Chris Thornton had an interview at Companion House about supporting Nigisti, agreeing to do so after taking a ‘deep breath’. The primary carers were Chris Thornton, Bernice Lee, Janet Popovic, and Betty Rodway, mainly spending time with her, providing companionship and taking her for a drive or shopping. Raad Butres was also very helpful during this period.”*

She was desperately lonely and often would refuse to get out of the car after going for a drive with one of our support people. Nigisti had come to Canberra in the belief that because this was where the government was, she would be able to get her children back.

*“She was desperate. Her depression worsened when she had no success. On 1st July, Chris Thornton found her body hanging in the carport.”*

She, Betty Rodway and Malcolm waited for the police for one and half hours.

*“In the meantime 25 to 30 members of the Ethiopian community had gathered and wanted to take Nigisti’s body and return it to Ethiopia. Malcolm was able to persuade them to stay away from the body and wait for the authorities. They also wanted the church committee to give them \$20,000 to cover the cost of returning the body to Ethiopia.*

*“Thereafter followed legal proceedings in the Coroner’s office as the Tasmanian Government of behalf of the two daughters sought the body for burial. The Ethiopians in Canberra objected and eventually after much APS investigation in Africa the coroner decided to send the body to Tasmania. Meanwhile Colin Bradford arranged for a memorial service to be held for Nigisti which was much appreciated by all members of the community.*

*“Companion House also arranged counselling for Chris Thornton and Malcolm as they had been caught up and witnessed a tragic situation.” The Committee had to involve the police to expedite the Public Trustee processing of the estate.*

*“Nigisti had a memorial containing precious things of her children. When Chris Thornton and Malcolm went to retrieve them from the house which had been left unlocked, very little was left. The remaining items were bundled up and sent to the children in Tasmania.”*

### ***How were the families supported?***

The first weeks when a refugee family arrived were very intense, with so many agencies to be approached, so much to be bought or received from donors to set up the household, and often cultural issues to be dealt with. Malcolm was methodical, leaving detailed records of

the steps for the families he was directly involved with. Here is an example for Raad Butres who was relatively easy because of his good English.

### **RAAD BUTRES - SUPPORT PROVIDED AFTER ARRIVAL**

**13/4/94**

**CES -(Swanson Plaza, 1st level).**

- 1. Registered and ID LK 22302D issued.**
- 2. Claim form for DSS provided (for Jobsearch Allowance).**
- 3. Advised to consult NOOOSR re engineering qualifications recognition.**
- 4. Felt that training in Professional English Assistance may be useful from Immigration, Tasman House, Marcus Clarke Street.**

**DSS (Northpoint Plaza, 1st level).**

- 1. No hardship payment available.**
- 2. Provided application for Tax File Number.**
- 3. ID 206556873T issued.**
- 4. Basic pension to be approved after advice of bank account and TFNo.**
- 5. Application for benefit to be submitted each fortnight, starting about 26/4/94, with mandatory inclusion of names of two prospective employers approached during the fortnight.**
- 6. Raad completed statement of arrival as refugee and stating willingness to work.**
- 7. Office hours M,T,T,F - 8.30 to 4.30, W - 8.30 to 1.30.**
- 8. Payment of benefit into bank account usually one working day after claim lodged.**

**Initial food supplies purchased**

**14/4/94**

**Tax office (Civic, moving to Belconnen new building).**

- 1. Completed application for Tax File Number.**
- 2. Should be advised, by mail and direct to DSS within 2 to 3 weeks.**
- 3. ATO took copy of travel document.**

**State Bank Belconnen Mall**

- 1. Account opened, no initial deposit needed, no account keeping charge, 20c charge per withdrawal. (State all in one account)**
- 2. Green card and cheque book to be provided (in a week or so).**
- 3. PIN and cheque book to come in mail, collect card from bank.**

**Medicare (Belconnen Mall)**

1. Medicare No. issued, card to come in mail in a week or so.
2. Health card related to DSS benefit comes from DSS when 1st payment made.

**K-Mart Belconnen Mall**

Cleaning utensils etc. purchased.

**DSS (Northpoint Plaza)**

1. Advised bank account no.
2. Queried effect of 2-3 weeks delay in issue of TFNo.?
3. Then became clear that we had been given wrong form to take to ATO.
4. Completed the "correct" form and were told that the claim would be approved very soon and that advice would come by mail as to date to lodge first application for benefit (about 26/4/94). If no advice by then go in to check if should lodge that day.
5. ACT Housing Trust form completed with advice of amount of benefit to be paid.

15/4/94

**National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition (NOOOSR) Derwent House, University Avenue.**

1. Interviewed by Kim Turnell (276 7660).
2. He referred to a publication on Iraqi qualifications and their acceptance in Australia. Raad's degree is from University of Technology, Bagdad and it is accepted as qualification for professional engineer in Australia.
3. Two options
  - \* lodge application for formal assessment by NOOOSR, costs \$100, results in provision of statement of acceptability of qualifications to prospective employers.
  - \* seek review of qualifications by Institution of Engineers.(I have yet to review brochure provided on the latter option).

**Substantial food purchases and remaining basic kitchen utensil needs (Coles Belconnen Mall).**

**ACT Housing Trust**

1. Completed applications for accommodation and for rental rebate.
2. They advised rental to be paid.
3. Lease signed.
4. Minor perturbation when they realised Raad had been in residence since 13/4/94, said lease should have been signed before he moved in ! Made peace on this issue.
5. Condition report on flat to be completed and returned within 7 days.



## **ACTEW Belconnen Mall**

- 1. Account transferred to Raad's name from Graham's.**
- 2. Meter not read since connection on 12/4/94, reading not due until June.**
- 3. Application for rebate of power charges - have to wait until Health Card issued by DSS. With it rebated rate applies for power used for 2 weeks before issue date of card.**

### **Major items to do soon**

- 1. Resolve whether to go down NOOOSR track.**
- 2. Get Library Card.**
- 3. Arrange to purchase washing machine.**
- 4. Complete flat condition report.**
- 5. Make first call at CES to look at job cards.**
- 6. Prepare Resume for Job Application and provide initial help with writing Job Application and in making approaches to prospective employers.**

## **Malcolm**

Families with children needed them to be taken to school in the first week, and bus travel had to be explained and demonstrated. Health or dental problems sometimes required many visits. The ones suffering from torture or trauma needed specialist assistance from Companion House.

There was a large list of people in the church willing to help refugees and it is not possible to list everyone. On one call for help, these people put their names forward:

Christine Donnelly	Linnea Leece	Don Pricebeck
Susan Blake	Kirsty Craven	Roger Kilham
Malcolm Morrison	Fiona Brown	Uthami Thomas
Michael Brown	Margaret Howe	
Maurice Beatton	Pidgeon family	

This was just for one family. Many other people also contributed a lot of time in supporting other families. Roger Kilham provided the accounting support managing the money that we raised for all of the families and acquitting the grants provided by government.

Before a family arrived, accommodation sometimes had to be found, and furniture and household goods were needed. This is a typical appeal in the church notices:

## REFUGEE SUPPORT

There has been a strong response of support to the recent appeal for help in settling Raad Butres, a refugee from Iraq, into our local community. Thank-you to those who have helped.

We have been asked to take another family, a couple with two children, from Sarajevo. The couple are homeless and of mixed marriage, which means they have no hope of making a home as their country is divided up along racial lines.

If you have household goods you no longer need. Graham Freeman is drawing up a list of items available in readiness for their expected arrival in June, and a list of people who would prefer to help with settling in.

### Household Items for Refugee Support for family of two adults and two children, from Bosnia, arriving in June

Towels	Watson	Tea-towels	Bennett
Single sheets	1 pr. Stanton Bennett Watson	Double sheets	1 pr. Stanton Padjen
Pillow cases		Single Blankets	Bedspread
Double Blankets		Doona/comforter/quilt	
Cups		Saucers	
Bread/butter Plates	Howe, Stanton	Dinner Plates	Howe Stanton Bennett.
Cutlery set	Stanton	Saucepans	Woodman Godfrey
Electric frypan	Coulston	Biscuit container	
Cake tin	Coulston	Fruit bowl	
Sugar bowl		Cooking utensils	
Refrigerator	Woodman	Table	Woodman Grimmett
Kitchen chairs	4, Woodman	Lounge chairs	2, Woodman
Coffee table	Coulston	Television	
Double bed	Q. Padjen	Double mattress	
Single beds		Single mattresses	
Heater	Morrison	Curtains	Howe
Washing machine		Toys	Coulston
Pillows	Watson	Coffee percolator	Padjen

People willing to help in dealing with local authorities, such as Dept of Social Security, CES, Taxation, Medicare, bank, etc, by taking the family to the offices and minimizing misunderstanding:

Usually the families greatly appreciated the help they were given. Here is a letter of thanks from Naysin to the church for the support given in bringing out her remaining family.

From NAYSIN-HAC and  
the HAC and Diep families

To the congregation of The North Belconnen Uniting Church.  
My family wishes to thank you for assisting my son and daughter's families in their Migration to Australia. The church provided assurances of support for their Migration Applications, which helped very much in obtaining approval for my children's Migration.

You have made us feel a part of this church's family. The congregation has been very generous in opening their hearts to us and providing further support ~~here~~ in Canberra. We wish to thank you all for providing beds, nappies, blankets, clothes, sheets, heater, bedspread and any other items. You have made my children's families feel welcome and accepted.

Lynne & Alwyne Leece gave of their time Friday to help ~~bring~~ bring our families to the C.E.S. Social Security, Medicare and bank. They very kindly treated us to coffee & other refreshments and helped to make us feel more Australian.

We are currently living in the houses of Seyha Hac and Leng Diep and hope that with further assistance we may soon be in Government housing.

Thank you all very much, from the depths of our hearts.

### **Political advocacy**

While it was very satisfying for the givers to provide the material and social needs of the refugee families, which was almost always gratefully received, there was another need expressed often: for family members to be brought here to reunite the family. This was first felt with the families of Leng Diep. After fleeing from the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese army in Cambodia to the relative safety of the Khao-i-Dang camp in Thailand, they were then in limbo, with no immediate prospect of migration to Australia. Leng was so desperate for his family that he asked us to pay his airfare back to Thailand so that he could see his siblings at the camp. Once there, he was allowed to speak to them for an hour through the mesh fence, a very distressing experience for all because, in their joy at seeing him, his siblings burst into tears and spent most of the time together in this state.

Families here wanting overseas members to come to Australia were not automatically reunited. The ones overseas first had to be recognized by UNHCR, and then Australia had a list and quota that they worked through, independent of the needs of individual families. This was very difficult for Leng.

Leng's supporters began a letter writing campaign in 1985 to have his family in Khao-i-Dang brought to Australia. Many people in the community wrote, including people in the Anglican church because that church had employed him as a gardener when first in Australia. The Immigration Departmental file grew in size with this volume of correspondence and was described as 30cm deep. Jocelyn and David Waugh wrote a play which they and Graham Freeman performed at a meeting of the Australian Council of Churches. A number of articles were published in the Canberra Times about Leng's family. We learned that the Minister for Immigration wrote officially to another country warning against accepting people from Cambodia. Anyway, the efforts were eventually successful.

Our support group were not the only ones seeking improvement in refugee processing and family reunion. We established links with ICRA (the Indo-China Refugee Association) who were led by Marion Le and John and Denise Molony, a group at the Catholic Church at Kippax (Bev Purnell and Frank Ingwersson), and the group at Hughes Baptist Church. All of the groups were registered under CRSS, Community Refugee Support Services. Brigadine Sister Jane Keogh was also very active. It was not until 1988 that Leng's family were all accepted from Khao-i-Dang to come to Australia.

The next campaign waged was in support of Kosovars who had been given temporary protection in Australia. Most of them were happy to return to their own country when hostilities ceased, but some had genuine fear, and it was necessary to agitate on their behalf.

The political acceptability of refugees arriving by boat changed from the open policy under Malcolm Fraser and Bob Hawke to more hostility. Nick Bolkus in the last years of the Keating government introduced legislation supporting mandatory detention of asylum seekers, which was pushed with more vigour under John Howard. Although the minister, Phillip Ruddock, held meetings in Parliament House to which representatives of the refugee support groups were invited, allowing us to express our views, refugees were being held on Christmas Island, Port Hedland in WA, at Woomera, and the Baxter Detention Centre near Port Augusta, remote from the public gaze. Through the active concern of refugee supporters, people were able to send food parcels to individual refugees in the camps. Even though the Department identified refugees only by number, their names were available to us and letters of support could be sent.

Another change took place at this time. CRSS was replaced by IHSS (Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy). Instead of groups like ourselves being allocated a family who we would look after from their arrival at the Canberra airport, the Department now wanted groups to tender for services, with arrival processing being separated from follow-up and integration into society. When Malcolm and Joyce Morrison and Al and Linnea Leece attended meetings at Immigration offices, they were subjected to demeaning and insulting



# CHURCH resettles REFUGEES

by Craig Cormick



**T**here are now over 18 million refugees in the world — and the number is growing daily. They have been forced to flee their homelands to avoid war, political oppression or other acts of violence.

One Canberra suburban congregation discovered the realities of refugee life with the recent arrival of three groups of refugees.

The people, 12 in all, came from Iraq, Bosnia and Cambodia, and were diverse in background and family make-up. But all had in common the needs of refugees for basic support to help them restart their lives.

Melba Uniting Church in Canberra provided clothes, basic household goods and raised money to supplement the basic allowance provided by the Government.

The congregation was then notified of the Copelj family from Sarajevo (pictured here with Ra'ad Butres from Iraq), who arrived in mid-May. Jasmin and Snezana Copelj, a mixed Serbian-Muslim marriage, found the breakdown of their society had made it impossible for their family to live in safety. Once again the congregation mobilised resources.

Graham Freeman, convenor of the refugee support group, said the congregation, as an officially registered support group, was obliged to provide moral support to refugees. He also said that, although church or community groups were not obliged to provide financial support, the congregation had done so.

And he said that without the support of a church or community group, many refugees would not be granted entrance to Australia.

Resettlement of refugees, although described by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees as "often

considered the least satisfactory solution to the refugee problem", is for many the only chance of any life free from violence, hunger or oppression.

Malcolm Morrison, a church elder active in the resettlement of refugees, said that, while the needs of different refugees could differ greatly, the support often needed to continue to provide help with contacting trauma counsellors, or simply going to the doctor or CES.

The third group to come to the North Belconnen congregation was from Cambodia. They were not officially classified as refugees, but fell under the Department of Immigration's special assistance category. They comprised members of the wider family of Naysin Hac, who herself had arrived in Australia from Cambodia, with the church's support, in 1981. She travelled back to Cambodia in 1993, found her daughter and son, and began organising to bring them and their families to Australia. The new arrivals reached Canberra in late May and totalled seven people.

According to Scott Somerville-Knapman, of the Australian Council of Churches Refugee and Migrants Services, church groups play a large part in refugee resettlement in Australia. They are responsible for 70 per cent of the refugees settled under the Department of Immigration's Community Refugee Settlement Scheme, which accounts for about 10 per cent of all refugees settled in Australia.

And community input is extremely important in supporting refugees, whether it be political lobbying or simply in providing furniture or friendship.

He said that churches in Australia were very active in supporting groups who did not qualify for official refugee status, and therefore did not receive government assistance. Many Ethiopian and Somali arrivals, in particular, had been supported in this way.

Graham said that although the families supported by the North Belconnen congregation were continuing to attend the church, their motivation in supporting them was clearly not about building up church numbers. "It's not evangelical at all," he said. "It is a Christian response to a people in need."

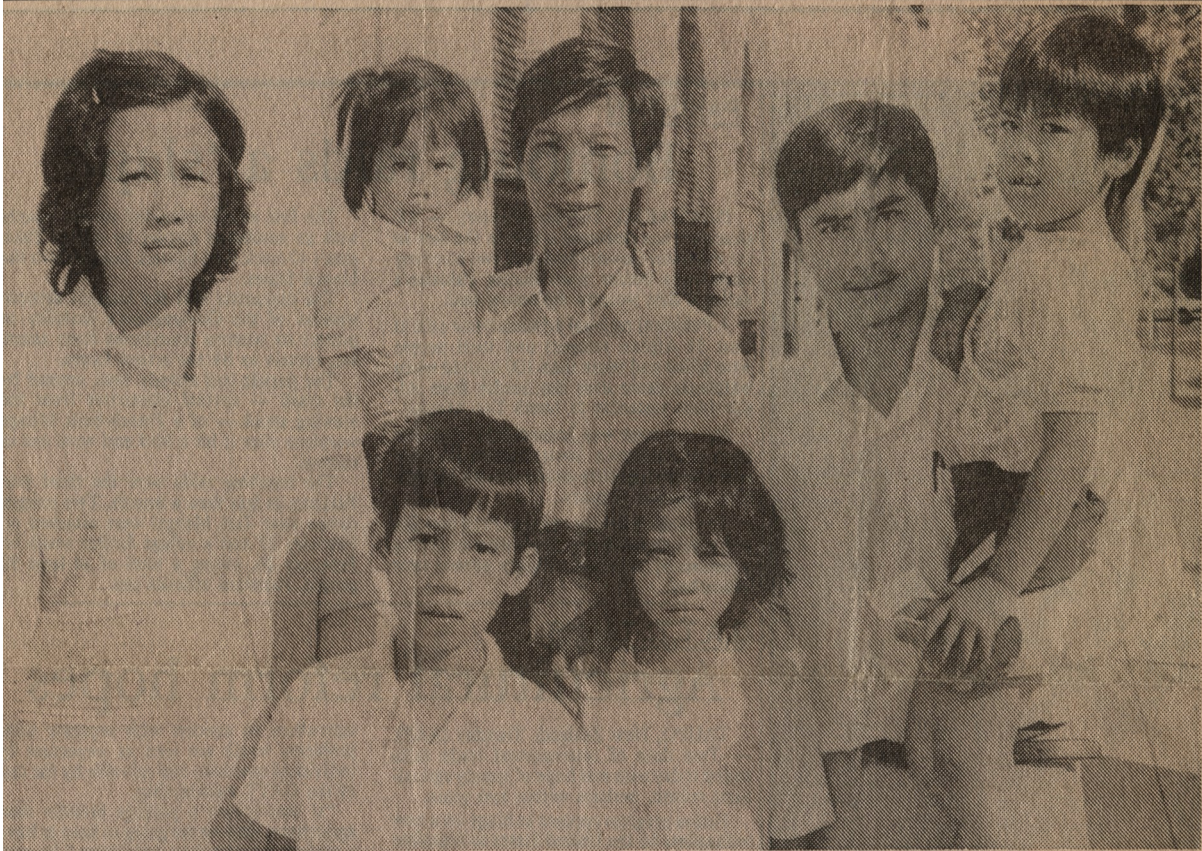
Malcolm Morrison said that he personally had found it a great blessing to be providing close support to these new friends. And for the congregation, he said, "it is a feeling that there are people whose need we have been able to meet at a time of their extreme need." ■

Craig Cormick is a Canberra writer and journalist and member of North Belconnen Parish.

language about what our church (and other groups) had done for refugees. They were told that refugee families talked with each other comparing notes, and complained to the government if they had not received support at the same level that others had. While there may have been some truth in this, it is also clear in looking back that people in the



March 1987



Picture: PETER WELLS

Mrs Muoy Ream and her husband Mr Yuhour Ream (holding daughter Ay Hux, 4) in Civic yesterday with Mr Leng Diep (holding his son Michael, 4) and the Reams' other children, Seng Chour, 11, and Ay Keang, 9.

## Reunion after 18 years apart

By JEFF WATERS

There was an anxious look on the face of Mr Leng Diep yesterday, as someone said, "Here they are," and a bus drove around the corner containing his sister and her family — Kampuchean refugees from whom he had been apart for 18 years.

Mr Diep, now an Australian citizen, fled Kampuchea in 1980 with his wife and child, but had lost contact with his sister and other members of his family in 1970 when the Khmer Rouge took control of his home town.

For 12 years he thought his family had been killed, but in 1982 he tracked them down to a refugee camp in Thailand.

The Australian Government made the reunion possible.

But the rest of Mr Diep's family — his mother, father and some brothers and sisters — remain in the annex to Khao-I-Dang camp, 10km from the minefield which separates Vietnam-controlled Kampuchea from Thailand.

They could not come to Australia, because when permission was granted to Mr Diep's sister, they were away looking for food, which was scarce in the camp.

This month, Mr Diep's family were told they would soon be moved to the "Site Eight" border camp — back into the hands of the Khmer Rouge, from whom they fled.

The convener of the North Belconnen Cooperating Churches refugee committee, Mr David Waugh, said yesterday the camp to which Mr Diep's family would be

taken would not be open to international observers.

Mr Waugh said about 1600 refugees were in the same situation as Mr Diep's relatives. Australian sponsorships had been lodged for them.

"Although a small number of Cambodian refugees are being processed by the Immigration Department to come to Australia, the group [assisting refugee settlement] fears it may be too little, too late," he said.

But anxiety soon fled from Mr Diep's face, when his sister Mouy, her husband Yuhour and their children stepped from the bus and into each other's arms. A family of six Lao refugees arrived with them.



government did not have the same respect for refugees that was previously held, and eliminating us from supporting families suited their political agenda.

IHSS represented the end of our official involvement with Immigration. We continued to support refugees for a few years, taking on families recommended to us from the Red Cross or from Companion House. The final straw was Nigisti's suicide. The primary care givers had their morale broken too.

Support for refugees has continued through lobbying and public demonstrations, seeking a change in policy, but the direct human contact with people needing our help has largely been lost.

### ***What became of the refugees we supported?***

Most of them settled well into Australian society. People do not uproot themselves and travel to a foreign land where their language is not spoken and where customs are very different from what they have known without very strong reasons. And the main thing most of them wanted was a better life for their children than they could possibly have for themselves. They came with a strong work ethic, unless they had been broken by torture or other ill-treatment. Only a few did not properly fit in.

The unfortunate case of Abdullahi was mentioned above, and also Nigisti and Nada Tomicic. Leng Diep also suffered. He had been a law student in Cambodia but had abandoned his studies and destroyed all paper records of what he had completed. The Khmer Rouge were killing anyone with an education. So in Australia, he first got a job with the Anglican Church, working as a gardener, while studying Information Technology at night. He then started a shop selling computers where he was able to employ two of his brothers after they came out. A competing computer shop was jealous of his success and threatened him. Then one night, petrol was poured under the front door of his shop and set alight. It destroyed his business and his morale. He went from owning a large house in Palmerston where many family members lived to being a gambler, borrowing money from friends to feed his habit. He returned to Cambodia as an Australian citizen but built up a gambling debt. We had to pay for his return airfare to Australia, but his ties with his own family had now been broken.

Few of our refugees had this sad outcome, and their next generation flourished. Most of the children went to university, with some obtaining higher degrees and good jobs. They have fitted in well and made a success of their new life in Australia. The pain and suffering of their parents have been rewarded with a safe and successful life for the children.

It is not possible to recognize in this document all of the people who helped in refugee support at North Belconnen over the years. So many of the people needing our help touched our hearts. Church members on their own initiative gave support to a family without telling others what they were doing. The refugees appreciated whatever help they were given, and the helpers found it just as rewarding to experience their gratitude.

Graham Freeman  
November 2020

## Alphabetical Index

- Abdullahi 8, 9, 21  
 Afghanistan 9  
 Armin 7  
 Asli 8  
 Behnan 5, 9  
 Bosnia 6, 7, 10  
 Butres 5, 9, 12, 13  
 Cambodia 2, 3, 4, 6, 17, 18, 21  
 Chun 4  
 Companion House 11, 12, 15, 21  
 Copelj 6  
 Croatia 10  
 CRSS 18  
 Demiri 11  
 Diep 3, 4, 17, 21  
 El Salvador 7  
 Eman 5  
 Ethiopia 12  
 Ezemine 11  
 Fatmir 11  
 Ganimete 11  
 Gyzele 11  
 Hac 2, 3, 6  
 Heng Sothavy 4  
 Hoc 6  
 Hok 6  
 Hondo 7  
 Huy 6  
 ia 7  
 IHSS 18, 21  
 Iraq 5, 7, 9  
 Iseni 11  
 Ivica 7  
 Jasmin 6, 7  
 Kabul 9  
 Kebede 12  
 Kenya 8  
 Khao-i-Dang 4, 17, 18  
 Khmer Rouge 17, 21  
 Kim Hong 4  
 Kosovar 11, 18  
 Kosovo 11  
 Leng 3, 4, 17, 18, 21  
 Milica 10  
 Nada 7, 21  
 Naysin 2, 3, 6, 16  
 Nevzadi 11  
 Nigisti 12, 21  
 Osman 8, 9  
 Osmani 11  
 Peng Eng 4  
 Phal 6  
 PTSD 11  
 Quenan 11  
 Quintanilla 7  
 Raad 5, 9, 12, 13  
 Ramadan 11  
 Red Cross 11, 21  
 Resat 11  
 Rith 6  
 Seddiqa 9, 10  
 Seddiqi 9  
 Serb 6, 11  
 Sin 4  
 Sokha 6  
 Somali 8  
 Sran 4  
 Stjepan 10  
 Sudan 9  
 Suzana 7  
 Tomicic 7, 21  
 Vietnam 1  
 Vilma 7  
 Wisal 5, 9  
 Yugoslavia 11  
 Zaide 11  
 Zana 6



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